

# U.S. Navy base opens its doors

*Until recently, Petty Officer 3rd Class Brett Cote was a staff writer for Skyline, a bi-weekly newspaper published by Naval Air Station Meridian. A U.S. Navy journalist, Brett has been transferred to the Defense Information School in Maryland. His ultimate duty assignment will be as a combat photographer attached to forward units overseas.*

*Brett's story is about Lauderdale County's largest corporate citizen, NAS Meridian, and how its personnel came through during a large crisis — just as they do in smaller ones.*

*This story is about how the base welcomed evacuees when Hurricane Ivan struck in September.*

**By Brett Cote**  
special to The Star

While residents of Florida and the Gulf Coast were boarding up windows and locking doors, Naval Air Station Meridian opened its doors to nearly 1,000 evacuees who came to Meridian seeking shelter from Hurricane Ivan.

Evacuees began arriving at the housing office, which doubled as the evacuee welcome center, as early as Sept. 13, said Chief David Dollins, NAS Meridian's disaster preparation coordinator.

"We had approximately 1,000 people from Pensacola to New Orleans," Dollins said.

"We had Reservists, dependents, active duty and retired people. It was a lot of people, but we didn't reach our capacity. We had about 250 cots laid out that didn't get filled."

Evacuees were given barracks rooms, bachelors' quarters and housing units. Some students at the Naval Technical Training Center and Marine Aviation Training Support Squadron 1 packed up their stuff and moved from one end of the barracks to the other to consolidate space and make room for the evacuees.

"We don't mind moving," said Pfc. Bennett Edgerly, a displaced MATSS-1 student.

"This is the least of our concerns.



Dickman

## THE CAPTAIN'S MESSAGE

In an e-mail that went out after the storm, Capt. Jeffrey Dickman, NAS Meridian's commanding officer, said: "Lots of people sacrificed their time, talents and sleep to take care of people we did not even know ... and they did it all with class and courtesy for those who were displaced from their homes. It was a real team effort. All I can say is thank you. I am truly honored to be able to work with such dedicated Americans."

We're more worried about the civilians who are coming up here. All we have to do is move a sea bag's worth of clothing; those people are worrying about losing their homes."

Edgerly's attitude was echoed among the other students who moved to make room for the evacuees. One family on the receiving end of the students' hospitality was 1st Class Master-at-arms Ricardo Del Toro and his family.

"I've got two children and my wife," Del Toro said.

"I thought they were going to put us in a big gym with cots, but they gave us two rooms. So it's pretty cool. I couldn't ask for more."

Providing the feeling of being in a safe and sheltered place was a big part of the evacuation mission. Coast Guard Lt. j.g. Russell Hall, an evacuee from New Orleans, said the fact that NAS Meridian

was prepared and able to provide beds for the evacuees gave those people one less thing to worry about in an already stressful situation.

"Everybody wants to feel safe where they are," Hall said.

"They've got us here feeling safe, that way we don't have to worry about anything here. They know what we're going through in our minds. We're worrying about everything we left behind, and we're wondering what's going to be there when we get back.

"Everybody has been really concerned for us, and we're just really grateful for the hospitality that everybody has shown us."

Dollins said being able to offer that level of hospitality was only possible because of the hard work of many people from the different departments on base.

Military and civilian personnel stepped up to help, and without them, Dollins said, the base wouldn't have been able to shelter the number of people it did.